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Title: An Appetite for Ambivalence: Pope Studies in the Twenty-First Century

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An Appetite for Ambivalence: Pope Studies in the Twenty-First Century

INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

“Who now reads Pope?” This is the question posed somewhat bleakly by G. Douglas Atkins at the outset of his 2013 study, *Alexander Pope’s Catholic Vision* (viii). The question is grounded in a sense that the great achievements of Pope studies—the scope and scale of John Butt’s Twickenham edition of Pope’s poems (1939-1969), and the impressive biographical monument that is Maynard Mack’s *Alexander Pope: A Life* (1985)—belong firmly to a bygone period of literary criticism. Atkins describes a Pope “industry” that has “essentially gone silent”, and as his own work progresses he finds a blessing in this, an opportunity to “deconfine” Pope, to acknowledge the poet’s enormous capacity for scepticism and contradiction without straining towards the complete, enlightened portrait that might once have been expected (p.1). In taking this view, Atkins is half-justified. When one surveys the twenty-first century’s engagement with Pope’s life, career and reputation, there does seem to be a conspicuous retreat from grand statements and comforting universalisms, a retreat epitomising developments in critical practice more widely. For all that Pope is still recognised as the most celebrated and accomplished poet of early eighteenth-century Britain, such recognition is consistently qualified if not undermined by an awareness of his simultaneous marginality, his conflicting ideological impulses and social postures. It is in this sense that Atkins is mistaken: many scholars are reading and writing about Pope today with the same understanding of the poet’s multiplicity and his appetite for ambivalence. Studies of him in isolation are indeed relatively rare, but our appreciation of Pope has benefited hugely from a critical willingness to observe him alongside his friends and his enemies, his precursors and sundry heirs. Far from having disappeared from view, Pope has become an even more central figure in what Moyra Haslett describes as an Augustan print culture at once “disputatious” and strangely committed to “the idea of sociability” (Haslett, 2003, p.23). Pope’s paradoxes correspond to our increasingly refined perception of the era’s own points of ambivalence, its fraught negotiations between history and modernity, certainty and doubt.

Of course, Pope’s ambivalence is not exclusively a twenty-first-century discovery. Mack was himself sensitive to his subject’s complexities and personal failings, even as the grand sweep of the *Life* gave the impression that these facets of the poet’s character could be contained within a more stable, harmonious worldview. Where Mack’s generation often took upon themselves the task of defending Pope, more recent scholarship has rarely felt obligated

to do so and has been warier of Pope's own self-mythologizing tendencies. In this regard, work on Pope since the turn of the millennium has been heavily indebted to a number of landmark studies from the previous two decades. Laura Brown's *Alexander Pope* (1985) was published in the same year as Mack's magnum opus, but appears with hindsight to have inaugurated an entirely separate era. By identifying Pope's awkward position with respect to imperialist discourse and by openly attacking him for his moments of complicity or obfuscation, Brown's approach, however controversial, provided impetus for much subsequent analysis. Around the time of the poet's tercentenary in 1988, and on through the 1990s, scholarship returned frequently to Pope's ideological compromises and his oscillation between positions of victim and oppressor. The problematic, often misogynistic handling of gender in his works was the subject of pivotal studies by Valerie Rumbold (1989), Carolyn D. Williams (1993) and Christa Knellwolf (1998). Perhaps most influentially, Helen Deutsch's *Resemblance and Disgrace* (1996) used the contrast between Pope's aspirations to cultural authority and his experience of physical disability, with its attendant social humiliation, to explore his contradictory relationship to the figures of author and reader.

Undoubtedly these strands of Pope scholarship ran alongside—and to some extent, continue to intersect with—more traditional assertions of Pope's moral certitude and idealism. Brean Hammond's wonderful exploration of the poet's friendship with Lord Bolingbroke (Hammond, 1984) ultimately found solace in their "mutual commitment to the ideal of virtue" (p.165) even as it exposed fault-lines in Pope's political agenda that have been extensively discussed in later criticism. Howard Erskine-Hill began his 1998 edited collection with the confident assertion that Pope had "a vision of the world" (p.1), a vision that Erskine-Hill would explicate in his chapter on Pope and slavery as an essentially liberal, humane one, much in contrast with the arguments put forward by Brown. And yet Erskine-Hill had himself done as much as anyone, from the carefully contextualised history of *The Social Milieu of Alexander Pope* (1975) through to the political reading of *The Rape of the Lock* in *Poetry of Opposition and Revolution* (1996), to demonstrate the nuance and anxiety implicit in Pope's political stances. Having argued for Pope not as the poet of an age of stability but as a figure lured towards Jacobitism and terrifyingly at odds with the Hanoverian establishment he courted (see also Erskine-Hill, 1981), Erskine-Hill must take considerable credit for today's prevailing acceptance of tension and suspicion as key elements in Pope's poetic career.

This is the Pope inherited by most of the scholars that I will be discussing throughout this article: one whose ambivalences are exhausting and inexhaustible, extending as they do

to matters of poetics, politics, philosophy and a still nascent concept of public discourse. Though the twenty-first century was not the first to uncover these qualities in Pope's life and thought, it has done a great deal to shed light on them. It has brought us several edited collections devoted to Pope, most notably Catherine Ingrassia and Claudia N. Thomas's "*More Solid Learning*" (2000), Flavio Gregori's special issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (2005), Pat Rogers' wide-ranging *Cambridge Companion* (2007) and a recent collection commemorating the tercentenary of *The Rape of the Lock* (Nichol, 2016). The subtitle of Gregori's volume, "A Poet on the Margins and in the Center", evokes with particular clarity the sense of duality and contradiction which now dominates critical approaches to Pope.

The opening decades of the twenty-first century have not given us a biography to rival Mack's in thoroughness or authoritativeness, but Netta Murray Goldsmith writes her endearing life of Pope (2002) in the full knowledge that attempts at one-upmanship would be unnecessary and probably futile. Instead, her biography is responsive to critical concerns about Pope's marginality. She intriguingly posits that it was Pope's very exclusion from the institutions of public life, his situation as a Catholic at a time of immense prejudice and paranoia, that helped him to accomplish as much as he did in his poetry. Together with her attempts to psychologise the creative mind, this makes for an unorthodox, perhaps even fanciful biographical account, but it is nonetheless in keeping with the spirit of ironic observation and sceptical inquiry that motivates other, more obviously scholarly, recent work.

What of the texts themselves? The Twickenham edition is by no means obsolete, but many Pope scholars have acknowledged that its textual apparatus (especially in James Sutherland's *Dunciad* volume) is unfriendly, and that scholars and general readers alike require editions updated to reflect more recent research. Tom Jones's recent edition of *The Essay on Man* (Jones, 2016), accompanied by an extensive introduction, has set a high benchmark for analysis and explication of a single text. Anthologies from Oxford World's Classics (2008) and Penguin (2011), edited by Pat Rogers and Leo Damrosch respectively, have provided sound, affordable editions of the major works, ensuring that Pope remains accessible to undergraduate students and visible in university syllabuses. The situation regarding a new complete edition of Pope is more complex since there are currently two major, ongoing projects on this front. Longman's Annotated English Poets has so far brought out two excellent volumes covering the various iterations of *The Dunciad*, both edited by Valerie Rumbold (Rumbold, 1999; Rumbold, 2007). More volumes are apparently forthcoming, but the remit of the series is obviously limited, as Twickenham was, to the

poetic works. Oxford University Press's plan for a complete edition of all Pope's writings, commissioned in 2017, is more ambitious and a cause for great excitement in the field. New editorial attention to Pope's prose and his letters is especially overdue. It is to be hoped that Oxford's volume will respond to recent scholarship by Raymond Stephanson (Stephanson, 2007) that has shown how George Sherburn's seminal 1956 publication of the poet's correspondence inadvertently obscured from view the texts as they were prepared by Pope and published in his own time.

All told, then, this is a highly promising and exhilarating moment for Pope studies, far removed from the suggestion of scholarly apathy or obliviousness raised by Atkins' rhetorical question. The sheer quantity of fascinating research that has been conducted on Pope in the last eighteen years means that the survey offered in this article cannot pretend to any kind of completeness; I will concentrate on those studies which seem to me to have contributed to the consensus view of Pope's divided self that I have already outlined. For convenience's sake, the remainder of the article is divided into thematic sections, each focusing on a different aspect of Pope's ambivalence, but with the understanding that there are inevitable points of overlap and that most Pope scholars are not interested in exploring these themes in isolation from each other. I would also make a couple of supplemental observations before embarking on this thematic analysis. First, it is worth noting which Pope texts have received the most sustained attention in recent scholarship. Yes, his mock-heroic and mock-epic masterpieces, *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*, have attracted their fair share of scrutiny. But alongside this, there seems to have been a massive resurgence of interest in more obviously earnest and arguably less successful works: the youthful panegyric of *Windsor Forest*, for example, as well as the convoluted philosophising of his *Essay on Man*. Critics have perhaps gravitated to these works for their very flaws, their struggle to paper over the cracks in Pope's ideological and philosophical programmes. I would venture to say that it is precisely because they are not intentionally ironic or satirical endeavours that scholars have found the excavation of their ironies and insecurities so rewarding.

A second, broader observation is that criticism has demonstrated a parallel between our appetite for ambivalence as readers of Pope and his own apparent instincts towards equivocation. Since they are no longer compelled to justify or validate the poet's grandiose narratives of literary sociability, independence and authority, scholars are much better placed to enjoy with him the acts of deceit or self-deception upon which his performances so often hinge. This is not to imply that Pope was somehow as depraved as his many satirical opponents would have him; only that his attempts, not always convincing, to reconcile

opposing priorities serve in many cases to make him a more congenial, human figure. It would be a mistake to represent Pope as being entirely comfortable or confident in his ambivalence. When he boasts in his *Imitations of Horace* that “Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory”, his much-vaunted “moderation” comes awfully close to the kind of vacillation that elsewhere in his poetry earns opponents like Lord Hervey the utmost opprobrium. Still, even in such moments of unease we can detect a kind of pleasure on Pope’s part, inviting us to sympathise or daring us to condemn. It is in this possibility of shared pleasure, a delight in the poet’s uncertainties and hypocrisies, that much of my own excitement for the future of Pope studies resides.

PRIVACY AND PUBLICITY

Of the various facets of Pope’s ambivalence that have received attention in recent years, one that seems to me to be most significant and to influence his positioning in many other contexts is his notoriously conflicted attitude towards the burgeoning public spheres in which he flourished. The paradox can be expressed in different ways. He was the first poet to embrace the mechanisms of the literary marketplace fully and successfully, but he also longed for the old modes of patronage that the marketplace made obsolete. He prided himself upon his capacity for virtuous friendship and yet he seemingly had few qualms about publicly advertising this capacity in ways that cast doubt on its authenticity. Moreover, he clearly enjoyed the combative potential of print culture while repeatedly casting aspersions on it.

This split in Pope’s attitude towards print and publication is confronted from the start of James McLaverty’s influential study, *Pope, Print and Meaning* (2001). McLaverty identifies one Pope “who loved print” and another “who hated it” (p.1); with close attention to Pope’s typographical practices, he goes on to reveal a poet determined to take control of his public self but nonetheless conscious of the factors—his social alienation or the unruliness of the print business itself—that might limit such control. McLaverty comments insightfully on Pope’s tactic of occupying “potentially hostile zones” himself (p.14), a kind of pre-emptive self-abasement that served to protect him throughout his career. In eventually celebrating the “moral ambiguity” and “evasiveness” of the *Dunciad Variorum* as intentional products of Pope’s approach to print (p.106), McLaverty recognises both the sense of disquiet surrounding Pope’s ambivalence and the ways that it could be deliberately cultivated and nurtured as part of a defensive strategy.

A wealth of critical material has responded to McLaverty's thoughtful scholarship and particularly to the close attention he gives to the precise circumstances of individual publications (see also McLaverty, 1995; McLaverty, 2002; and most recently, his work on the interplay between Pope's sexual and textual ambivalence in McLaverty, 2017). Thus, Edmund G. C. King has revisited the eccentric typographical choices of Pope's much-derided edition of Shakespeare to show that he was trying to erode the barrier between printed page and manuscript (King, 2008, p.10). Scott Cleary adopts a similar stance when reading the footnotes added to *Windsor Forest* for its 1736 republication as "signifiers of marginality", assertions of Pope's own status as a poet necessarily "in the shade" (Cleary, 2010, pp.648, 660). Jody Greene has explored the use of bookseller Anne Dodd for the publication of *The Dunciad* as a means by which Pope could attempt to own his work and disown it at the same time (Greene, 2005). This complements observations by Pat Rogers that Pope was attempting to "make obscurity conspicuous" in *The Dunciad*, a move in keeping with his fluctuating attitudes towards anonymity, authorship and the role of booksellers throughout his career (Rogers, 2002, p.241).

Providing an interesting counterpoint to Rogers, not necessarily contradicting him but complicating still further his picture of Pope as public author, is work by Seth Rudy and Katherine Mannheimer. Both have presented a view of Pope in which the urge to solidify and aggrandise a concrete public self seems to win out against a drive towards concealment. In setting Pope's ideas of poetic posterity alongside those of his friend Jonathan Swift, Rudy presents Pope as a writer compelled to seek completion, certainty and order in his bequest to future readers, drawn even to intervene on behalf of Swift's own authorial fame, despite the latter's considerably more anarchic philosophy of self-fashioning (Rudy, 2011). Mannheimer also explores Pope's view of poetic celebrity by contrasting him with an opposing literary figure. She shows how Samuel Johnson, in writing his *Life of Pope*, struggled to come to terms with the poet's "embroiled unity of self and work", the process by which Pope had so thoroughly internalised the logic of print, intertwining the private and the public (Mannheimer, 2007, p.631). Mannheimer has gone on to make complementary points in her 2011 monograph, *Print, Visuality and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Satire*. There she likewise builds on the precedent for typographical analysis set by McLaverty in order to outline the visual lessons and philosophies of visibility underlying texts by Pope and others. In an especially stimulating chapter dealing with Pope's four-book *Dunciad*, she argues that the poem is informed by the visual paradigms of the theatre, again presenting us with a knowingly performative Pope, one committed to his own public embodiment through print.

Implicated in all of these treatments of Pope and publicity is the question that I raised at the beginning of this section concerning Pope's personal friends and their significance for his public persona. As with so many other aspects of Pope's life, there is now a greater scepticism about Pope's use of the discourse of friendship, but this is not to say that today's scholars are invested in portraying Pope simply as a bad friend. Works such as Dustin Griffin's *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* (2010) have shown how the reality of the writers' relationship, underwritten by disagreement and distance as well as by affection, contributed hugely to the literary self-realisation of both. In my own monograph, *Friendship and Allegiance in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2013), I discuss the irony of friendly ideals as they are invoked and manipulated in Pope's letters and in several of his epistolary poems. But there can be no denying that Pope genuinely prized the idea of friendship even if his immersion in a fractious public sphere made that idea vulnerable to corruption. It is this respect for friendship and the ironic manoeuvres that Pope must sometimes undergo in order to preserve its sanctity that come into focus in Julian Ferraro's 2008 essay, 'Pope: Pen and Press'. Ferraro writes of the poet's amendments to his *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* and how the foregrounding of a "gesture of exclusion" can paradoxically make the poem more inviting, its depiction of Pope's friendship with Arbuthnot more convincing (Ferraro, 2008, p.131). Such a perspective also has implications for another essay published in the same year, Ashley Marshall's helpfully provocative 'The Myth of Scriblerus' (2008). Marshall ruffled some feathers with her argument that the actual literary impact of the Scriblerus Club (centred on Pope, Swift, John Gay and John Arbuthnot) had been much less than previously thought, and the club as we tend to understand it was more a product of twentieth-century wish-fulfilment than a historical fact. These are valid points that have encouraged a more nuanced approach to the possibility of a Scriblerian identity in subsequent scholarship. However, the brittleness of the club's mythology is not reason enough to dispense with the idea of clubbable friendship as it impinges on Pope's reputation and career; far from it, Marshall's arguments surely make the paradoxes and pitfalls of his sociable self-construction all the more central to our reading of him.

PHILOSOPHY

Scepticism tends to be the byword for Pope's philosophical agenda as it is understood in the twenty-first century, yet this is a scepticism that is itself often suspect, accommodating and running in parallel with a seemingly contradictory discourse of sublimity. So runs the

argument delivered in James Noggle's *The Skeptical Sublime* (2001), a book which uses its eponymous oxymoron to illuminate many facets of Pope's work from his politics to his poetic practice to his sociable aspect. Noggle states that, for Pope as for his likeminded Tory contemporaries, the "very articulation of the skeptical sublime as a power to be shunned leads [them] not only to accept it as the principal sign of the fallenness of society but to employ it (or find themselves employed by it) as the disowned, divided logic of their irony" (p.32). This is a lovely evocation of the philosophical bind in which Pope finds himself, but like a number of those scholars already cited, Noggle is insistent that Pope "chooses" equivocation as a deliberate tactic, one that supports rather than erodes a fundamentally conservative intellectual position (p.131). Once again, ambivalence is a site of both power and pleasure. Much the same impression is created by Fred Parker's work, where philosophical inconsistency and failure become—in texts such as the *Essay on Man* and the *Epistle to Bolingbroke*—the basis for a more functional scepticism: they "open the door to the affirmation of a life lived according to nature" (Parker, 2003, p.110). Christopher Tilmouth has seconded this view in his 2011 Chatterton Lecture to the British Academy, though he adds that Pope's "doubleness of perspective" is also prompted by his instinctual need to reassert his independence whenever he gets too close to the trappings of "collective sensibility" (Tilmouth, 2012, p.45).

In attempting to make sense of Pope's independence of thought, one must frequently return, of course, to the issue of his Catholic faith and the level of sincerity with which he kept to it. It would be tempting to explain it away as a biographical nicety, a choice based on the poet's respect for his parents rather than on deeply-held convictions; indeed, a number of Pope's own lines encourage such a reading and, for obvious reasons, this was an appealing interpretation for eighteenth-century Anglican readers invested in the social acceptability of his works. But while appreciative of his lapses from orthodoxy and intrigued by the apparently deistical tendencies of certain works, recent scholars have shown little indication that they are willing to jettison Pope's Catholicism as a central aspect of his philosophical stance. Hester Jones argues that religion is "pervasively present" in his writing (Jones, 2008, p.227). In the book from which I took this article's opening quotation, G. Douglas Atkins insists that we can only understand Pope inclusivism—an inclusivism that includes both scepticism and suspicion of scepticism—through reference to "the catholicity of his sensibility" (Atkins, 2013, p.59). Philip Connell goes further. In an excellent book chapter on Pope's "modes of faith", he places the poet's "subaltern religious identity" in the context of the political and religious debates of his time, demonstrating how his Catholicism acts as a

necessary, ironic counterbalance to his “repeated professions of peacable ecumenism and universal faith” (Connell, 2016, p.59).

Hence Pope’s Catholicism contributes to the doubleness that has already been observed throughout the present article. In the careful weighing up of conservative and progressive inclinations that constitutes his philosophical disposition, Pope’s faith is capable of counting towards either side, a marker above all of his very independence. Thus, in Tom Jones’ book delineating Pope’s intellectual affinities with the philosopher George Berkeley, it is in part the poet’s Catholicism and the awareness that it granted him of legal injustice that made him into “more of a radical sceptic in terms of economic and proprietary theory than [...] is generally allowed” (Jones, 2005, p.112). This in turn results in a poet far more doubtful of the fixed values of things and words, a figure at odds with the reassuring, empirical epistemology that had been promoted by John Locke in the late seventeenth century and has sometimes been taken as representative of the eighteenth-century intellectual landscape at large. In accordance with this approach, Barbara M. Benedict has described how the objects of *The Rape of the Lock* “tend to eviscerate or to appropriate moral and cultural significance, to evade, escape, or abuse human meanings” (Benedict, 2017, p.132). Elsewhere in the rich critical dialogue about Pope’s attitude towards objects and commodities, Alex Eric Hernandez highlights the same poem’s “conflation of the religious with the commodity” (Hernandez, 2008, p.578), a conflation likewise enabled by Pope’s Catholic vantage point and one that exposes the irony of sustaining a spiritual identity amidst a burgeoning consumer society. For a contrasting view, however, in which a less radical, more liberal Pope can be perceived as sharing in Locke’s contractual thinking, one would be well-advised to consult recent work by Courtney Weiss Smith (Weiss Smith, 2012; Weiss Smith, 2016). Similarly, James E. Force presents Pope as something of a closet Newtonian in his use of empiricist principles in the *Essay on Man*, though Pope is also more cautious than Newton about what we can infer of God’s nature and design from “our limited experience” (Force, 2009, p.124). As ever in Pope studies, the peculiar quality of his scepticism mitigates against clear and stable categorisations.

POETICS AND AESTHETICS

Insofar as poetics can be understood to encompass all aspects of Pope’s craft, from the technicalities of his meter to his multifarious use of classical voices, it is certainly open to the same readings of ambivalence that prevail elsewhere in current Pope scholarship. Indeed, the

couplet form itself, the basis for the vast majority of Pope's poetic output, can be seen as premised on duality. We have thankfully come a long way from the critical consensus as bemoaned by J. Paul Hunter in the mid-1990s (Hunter, 1996). Hunter attacked the complacent view that the couplet necessarily embodies a narrow conservatism. He paved the way for today's widespread recognition of the form's alternative functions, the couplet's apparent capacity for succinct expression and finality coming into regular conflict with its tendency to exhibit or ironize opposing viewpoints. In the words of Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, "the couplet itself demands a careful division of attention between local effects and larger patterns of thought", meaning that those poets who predominantly use couplets in their work naturally develop a kind of "literary double-vision" (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2008, p.233). For Roger D. Lund, writing about echoes of epigrammatic logic in Pope's verse, this double vision is problematic, since Pope often wished to rise above epigram as a mode and yet was tied to its own seductive rhythms and the patterns of equivocation that it promoted (Lund, 2003). Such recognitions make careful reading of Pope's metrical possibilities a necessity, John Sitter's chapter on verse and versification in the *Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* being a valuable starting point. Sitter patiently demonstrates the points of flexibility in Pope's supposedly regular rhythms, and offers particularly sensitive analysis of *Eloisa to Abelard's* famous line, "Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind" (Sitter, 2007, p.44). To Hollywood's credit, this line was also recited with some metrical thoughtfulness in the film of the same name, probably Pope's moment of greatest visibility in twenty-first-century popular culture hitherto.

Another aspect of Pope's ambivalent poetics is his relationship to genre, especially the exact connotations and effects of "mock" as he pioneers the mock-heroic and mock-epic modes. Simon Jarvis has situated Pope's mock as a precondition of modernity, a type of mockery that shapes the reader's way of seeing and, importantly, is capable of mocking the very idea of mockery: it "seeks to mortify, not only false claims to bliss or majesty, but also false disownings and recruitments of bliss and majesty" (Jarvis, 2004, p.5). This is broadly in keeping with Richard Terry's observations in his book, *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper* (2005). Terry also emphasises the heterogeneity of the mode, that it cannot be reduced purely to a comedic or satirical impulse, and that in Pope's case it corresponds to a crucial, recurring idea: "every attribute is capable of manifesting itself equally as a vice or a virtue" (Terry, 2005, p.136). We are likely to conclude, based on older works of criticism (Stack, 1985; Fuchs, 1989) as well as newer (Kelsall, 2007; Wood, 2015), that this same idea was chiefly responsible for Pope's gravitating towards Horace as his main source of classical inspiration

in works of the 1730s. Malcolm Kelsall links Horace to the opportunities for “disruption” in Pope’s attitudes to landscape design and property ownership (Kelsall, p.168). Nigel Wood contends, convincingly, that Pope adopted a Horatian persona in the full knowledge that it would be “multivalent”, divided between what was “outward-facing” and “a less easily discerned private dimension” (Wood, p.17). Pope’s earlier use of Homer is more difficult to parse as an implicitly ambivalent act, however. Robin Sowerby’s book, *The Augustan Art of Poetry* (2006), seems rather at variance with the other studies listed here, in that it sets out to defend “the refined artistry of Augustan poetry” and presents a Pope who is much surer of the “dignified and ceremonious solemnity” he aims for in works of translation (pp.6, 217). Such a view of Pope’s poetic mission has something in common with Timothy Erwin’s *Textual Design* (2015), which presents Pope as a champion of the values of “formal design” at the expense of “linguistic coloring” (p.27). Both Sowerby and Erwin useful readings of Pope, but their insistence on his singleness of purpose sit awkwardly, albeit perhaps constructively, alongside the critical consensus on his contradictory nature.

POLITICS

Earlier I quoted Pope’s description of his ambiguous political position as it was perceived by those more committed to the factional identities of his day than he was himself. Though it is questionable whether any of his contemporaries would ever have gone so far as to “call [him] Whig”, it has long been recognised that he did not fit neatly into a party political system which was itself subject to considerable realignment throughout his lifetime and whose sectarianism he ostentatiously rejected. Recent scholarship has consolidated this impression both through Pat Rogers’ detailed survey of Pope’s entire political life (Rogers, 2010) and through diverse studies of individual turning points and crucial texts. Rogers’ *Political Biography* returns often to Pope’s sense of alienation, his ties to particular political camps being vulnerable to changing friendships or the death of friends, as well as to the poet’s intrinsic love of intellectual independence that has already been observed in this article. Tellingly, the final two words of Rogers’ book are “proud resistance” (Rogers, 2010, p.231), but Pope’s resistance was not only to the organs of the Hanoverian state and the Court Whig governments that ruled Britain at the peak of his creative life. He also resisted full assimilation into the forces of political opposition, prevented by his nostalgia for the Stuart era and sporadic Jacobite sympathies from ever truly belonging in the Patriot Whig movement that rose to challenge so-called prime minister Sir Robert Walpole in the 1730s.

Christine Gerrard has commented on Pope's uncomfortable relationship to Whig oppositional culture with reference to his attacks on "the Whig sublime" (Gerrard, 2005, building upon her own previous research in Gerrard, 1994). And Tom Jones has eloquently established how Pope came to fear that he and his circle may themselves be implicated in the "coming barbarian invasion" through their indulgence in "political factionalism" (Tom Jones, 2013, p.895)

In order to understand the nature of Pope's nostalgia and his own variety of politicised patriotism, scholars have also increasingly attended to the events and emotional developments of his formative years, in the period leading up to Queen Anne's death and the Hanoverian Accession of 1714. Joseph L. Hone provides a partial reconstruction of Pope's lost juvenile epic, *Alcander, Prince of Rhodes*, to show that the work was likely founded on Jacobite tropes and imagery, and that Pope's later destruction of it probably owed more to its inflammatory political potential than to its poetic inadequacies (Hone, 2015). Along with several other scholars (Pellicer, 2008, for instance; and Wheeler, 2010), Hone has also revisited *Windsor-Forest*, and found in its approach to panegyric a prudently equivocal but nonetheless provocative expression of Pope's early political allegiances (Hone, 2014). Scholars might disagree on the precise extent of Pope's Jacobite leanings in this text, but all seem to converge on a view of the poet "carefully, cautiously aligning himself with the Tories" (Wheeler, 2010, p.18). In this, they are all necessarily indebted to Pat Rogers' exhaustive contextual analysis of the poem in his twin monographs, *The Symbolic Design of Windsor-Forest* (2004) and *Pope and the Destiny of the Stuarts* (2005). The latter book sets itself what Rogers himself describes as the "unfashionable task" of arguing for the poem's "rhetorical and intellectual coherence" as a reflection of Pope's feelings for his historical moment (Rogers, 2005, p.1). While this seems to imply a divergence from the ambivalent Pope described by other scholars and indeed elsewhere by Rogers himself, the vision of ideological unity proposed in the book is itself ultimately infused with the poet's sense of impending loss and the fragility of Jacobite hopes (Rogers, 2005, pp.315-317). In short, even when a scholar embarks with the avowed intention of revealing a less conflicted Pope, ambivalence finds ways to creep in.

Of course, politics in Pope is not only a question of party allegiance. It also relates to the fraught issues of his attitude towards slavery and his complicated treatment of gender identity. I will spend less time on these topics here not because they have been at all neglected by modern scholarship but because much of what has been written has corroborated and elaborated upon the impression of ambivalence in both areas that had

already been created by studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Valuable work by John Richardson, again focusing on *Windsor Forest*, has explored how Pope's "euphemistic avoidance" of the subject of slavery itself conveys his unease (Richardson, 2001, p.1). This reading, furthered in Richardson's book *Slavery and Augustan Literature* (2004), neatly charts a middle course between the opposed views of Brown and Erskine-Hill that I outlined earlier in this article. Jonathan Pritchard's exploration of Pope's probable family links to the slave trade (via his half-sister's son, John Rackett) has accomplished something similar (Pritchard, 2005). As for Pope the ambivalent misogynist, Valerie Rumbold in her contribution to the *Cambridge Companion* has diagnosed as perceptively as anyone the poet's conundrum: though dismissive and disrespectful towards women, he also projects onto them habits of mind and an instability of temperament which he was "prone on other occasions to diagnose in himself" (Rumbold, 2007, p.205). Tom Jones understands this as well, making the point that the charges of inconstancy levelled by Pope against women are also part of his own "claim to virtuosity" (Jones, 2010, p.16). Indeed, the very ambivalence that my article has taken as its central theme can thus be understood as connected to and coloured by Pope's conflicted outlook on his own gender identity. Other valuable discussions of this idea can be found in Rumbold's essay 'Dulness's Obscure Vowel' (2008) and in a book chapter by Jane Spencer (Spencer, 2005), both of which explore Pope's relationship with his mother and with concepts of the maternal as being at the root of his unavoidably self-deprecating misogyny.

WAYS FORWARD

So where does ambivalence leave us and where should it lead us? It is important to be clear that none of the scholarship surveyed in this article is drawn to observation of Pope's scepticism or his double perspective simply for the sake of it. His ambivalence is a means by which he articulates his commitments, creating pleasure in himself and his readers, but not providing an excuse for endless, gratuitous play. In most contexts, Pope's ambivalence is also a response to concrete historical, social or biographical circumstances; it is a logical, sensible, emotionally justified ambivalence that helps us to clarify both his awkward position within society and his immense literary success. In light of this functionality of his equivocation, it would be a great mistake for us to turn our backs on it. Though it might be tempting to keep the critical conversation moving by reverting to a more coherent, singular vision of Pope, this agenda would not be sustainable and it is doubtful whether it would facilitate any greater understanding of the poet, his works or his era. Instead, I would suggest that the immediate

priority of Pope studies, fuelled by the new editorial ventures detailed above, should be to continue the tradition of close textual and contextual analysis already ongoing, to give further attention to those works—especially his prose works—that have traditionally been less visible, and most importantly, to increase the poet’s presence in educational syllabuses and our culture more generally.

There are a few ways that this last goal might be achieved through research, that the ambivalent Pope might be made more widely accessible. One would be an increased willingness to theorise Pope at one remove from his social context. While this flies against my own scholarly instincts, there could be something liberating about reading Pope in light of deconstructionist, post-modern literary theories, schools of interpretative practice which, while already fairly dated themselves, have not often found as secure a home in the study of Augustan literature as in other sub-disciplines of literary studies. I have been fortunate enough to read an as yet unpublished article by Neil Pattison, on the subject of Pope’s “scrap epic”: his abortive magnum opus, *Brutus*. Pattison’s spirited reading of Pope’s thwartedness and the desires concealed in remnants of the epic convinces me that the poet’s ambivalence can be more heavily theorised without any danger that we lose sight of his historical moment.

The same can be said for the less radical exercise, already in progress, of positioning Pope more frequently alongside his literary forebears and successors, putting him in dialogue with earlier and later literary periods, whether through the planning of curricula or in works of scholarly analysis. His ambivalent relationship to the legacy of John Milton has been engagingly explored by the likes of Valerie Rumbold and Sophie Gee (Rumbold, 2004; Gee, 2010); David Fairer has discussed his inheritance from the Elizabethans (Fairer, 2007); and the situation of his *Essay on Criticism* within a history of literary commentary has been clarified in painstaking work by Philip Smallwood and others (Smallwood, 2011; Peti, 2012). But I am if anything even more enthused by recent scholarly work that has explored Pope’s literary afterlives and shown how the ambivalences implicit in his poetry contribute to, or are effaced by, later perceptions of him. Thus, an essay by Frieda Koeninger shows the Mexican Inquisition of the later eighteenth century trying to come to terms with poet who was at once a dedicated Catholic and worryingly heretical (Koeninger, 2002). Nicole Eustace shows the enduring significance but fluctuating signification of Pope for American colonists in the decades leading up to the war of independence (Eustace, 2008). And a delightful book chapter by Abigail Williams and Peter Huhne explains the great irony of Bloomsbury appropriations of Pope, the twentieth-century celebration of him for exactly those qualities—his certainty of literary identity, his reassuring sociability—which were in fact most open to

dispute (Williams and Huhne, 2016). Such examinations of the poet's afterlives cannot, of course, be the whole story of the future of Pope studies, but they elegantly makes the case for his lasting literary relevance and the astounding richness of his ironies.

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